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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000439

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
ALSO FOR IO/ A A/S WARLICK
PM FOR A A/S RUGGIERO
P FOR DRUSSELL
STATE PASS TO OVP HMUSTAFA
USUN FOR WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER
DOD/OSD FOR FLOURNOY, KAHL, AND DALTON
NSC FOR SHAPIRO, MCDERMOTT

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: UNIFIL COMMANDER WITH CODEL CARNAHAN
DISCUSSES OVERFLIGHTS, GHAJAR

Classified By: Classified by Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.
4 (b) and (d)

Summary

1.(C) General Claudio Graziano, Force Commander for UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) noted a general calm in the south during his April 9 presentation to visiting Congressional members Representative Russ Carnahan (D-MO) and Judge Debra Carnahan, Representative Mazie Hirono (D-HI), Representative Jim McDermott (D-WA), Representative Ben Chandler (D-KY), and Representative Diane Watson (D-CA). Graziano said the ongoing Israeli overflights in Lebanese airspace are technically an "act of war," and a "humiliation" to the Lebanese government and UNIFIL. He also commented that action must be taken on Israeli withdrawal from northern Ghajar before the June 7 parliamentary elections or the current UNIFIL proposal on Ghajar would no longer be valid with a new Lebanese government.

12. (C) Graziano recounted that tensions were high during the 2008 Gaza conflict, but his units were effective in containing an outbreak of violence by expanding patrols and interdicting rockets poised to fire into Israel. He assessed UNIFIL's ongoing critical missions are to prevent further rocket launches from UNIFIL's area of operation (AO), prevent smuggled weapons from entering the AO, work through the Tripartite (Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF)-Israeli Defense Forces (IDF)- UNIFIL) discussions to reduce Israeli overflights, and conclude an agreement to withdraw IDF from northern Ghajar. End summary.

13. (SBU) UNIFIL Force Commander General Claudio Graziano welcomed the visiting congressional delegation (Codel) at his Beirut HQ April 9. Members of the Codel included: Representative Russ Carnahan (D-MO) and Judge Debra Carnahan, Representative Mazie Hirono (D-HI), Representative Jim McDermott (D-WA), Representative Ben Chandler (D-KY), Representative Diane Watson (D-CA), Director of Interparliamentary Affairs Kay King, House Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC) Professional Staff Member John Lis, HFAC Professional Staff Member David Beraka, and USAF Colonel Joey Booher. The Ambassador was accompanied by Poloffs.

ISRAELI OVERFLIGHTS

14. (C) Graziano told the Codel that Israeli overflights of Lebanese airspace could be considered an "act of war." They "humiliate" the Lebanese government and UNIFIL, he assessed. He conceded that the recent reduction in the number of overflights was positive, but more were necessary. The issue of overflights is a regular agenda item during monthly Tripartite discussions between UNIFIL, the IDF and LAF, he noted.

GHAJAR: LITTLE TIME REMAINS

15. (C) In Graziano's overview of UNIFIL's proposal for IDF withdrawal from northern Ghajar, he stated that while his Israeli Defense Force contacts remained open to moving forward on the proposal as of last week, there was little time remaining to complete an agreement before a new Lebanese government was elected. He said after the June 7 parliamentary elections in Lebanon, the new government would have to reconsider the UNIFIL proposal. Graziano said he would meet new Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman the week of April 13 in Israel to discuss Ghajar, as well as other ongoing UNIFIL issues. (Note: We believe this will be in conjunction with a visit by UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon (UNSCOL) Michael Williams. End Note). He emphasized, however, that if UNIFIL could not show progress on an issue like Ghajar, then support for his UNIFIL mission could wane by 2010, given the need for UNIFIL troop contributing nations to focus on competing requirements in

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Afghanistan and elsewhere.

CRITICAL MISSIONS CONTINUE

16. (C) Interdicting weapons smuggling into the UNIFIL AO south of the Litani River continues to be a critical mission for UNIFIL, Graziano declared. He said, however, UNIFIL could, under the existing, agreed-upon rules of engagement, not search for weapons in homes or buildings unless there was evidence or cause to believe weapons would be found. Graziano acknowledged reports that Hizballah was more heavily armed than before the 2006 war, but he insisted his units have not seen evidence of the reported weapons smuggling.

17. (C) Graziano said several rockets found ready to launch last February could have escalated the conflict. However, UNIFIL's success in interdicting these weapons was a positive indication of good patrolling and coordination with the LAF. Earlier, Graziano described the LAF as an "experienced army" with some organizational and structural problems and lacking in equipment. (Note: The LAF has a limited budget for operations, which restricts its ability to take on more substantial roles with UNIFIL. It also has limited special forces and quick reaction capabilities, both of which are emphasized in U.S.-LAF training initiatives. End Note.)

HIZBALLAH'S WEAPONS

18. (C) Graziano noted that, in Lebanese eyes, many compared the presence of the Hizballah "resistance" forces to the French Resistance during World War II when asked by Rep. Carnahan about disarming Hizballah. Graziano emphasized an integration of Hizballah into the LAF required a political decision, and was a complex issue for the Lebanese government. Graziano maintained that current problems between the Palestinians and Israelis only exacerbated instability in Lebanon. He also reiterated that UNIFIL's mission, related to unrest in the Palestinian camps, was only in "tactical cooperation" with the LAF.

19. (U) Codel Carnahan cleared this message.

